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July 27, 2023

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Foreign Language for National Security: Let's Act, Not React

Lorie Roule

The IC requires the utmost capability to meet increasingly complex national security threats. Having sufficient foreign language-qualified personnel should be the least of its worries. Yet, we face the same challenges year after year in meeting foreign language demand. Let's be proactive and reframe our approach. We can create an intentional and dynamic foreign language strategy that adapts to new requirements, is immune from resource constraints, mandates the skill-set visibility needed to optimize talent, and harnesses ever-emerging new technologies to supercharge human capabilities. With leaders shining a light on the importance of foreign language and everyone—managers and employees alike—playing a role, the opportunity is ripe for sustainable IC-wide culture change that makes foreign language capability a given.

When Leon Panetta, a lifelong advocate of the importance of foreign language, became Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (DCIA) in 2009, he assumed that we all spoke a foreign language—CIA’s was an overseas mission after all. Not quite, we had to tell him. Building and sustaining foreign language skills remained a perennial challenge. Panetta promptly set a goal for the agency: “Double the number of Agency analysts and collectors who are proficient in foreign languages and increase by 50 percent the number of officers with the right language skills serving in jobs that require foreign language.”¹ As CIA’s Senior Language Authority, I was on the receiving end of this rather daunting task.

The CIA had good reason to move out smartly. Whereas our adversaries in the past had been well defined, the United States’ global threat matrix had become increasingly complex. We were combating global terrorism, tackling transnational weapons proliferation and narcotics, all while continuing to monitor trends and events across the globe that could impact U.S. national security. All this while we were embroiled in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and routinely countering threats from China, Iran, North Korea, Russia, and other nation-states.

Sound familiar? Fast forward to 2023 and our intelligence challenges have only grown in complexity and interconnectedness with cyber threats, global pandemic, China’s rapidly expanding military capabilities and international presence, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and unpredictable and often wild fluctuations in the finance and energy markets added to the mix. Wouldn’t we want to have the language skills we need at the ready? Yet, we continue to be reactive in our efforts to address the “foreign language challenge” in the Intelligence Community (IC) and the nation.

Short-Term Fixes Without Long-Term Result...

We know and have known that we need to do better. A walk through the global challenges we have faced in our nation’s history spotlights our deficiencies in foreign language capability—most pronounced during times of high-stakes need (see Appendix A). In reactive mode, we strived to find (often creative) solutions, primarily through increasing language study or hiring native speakers, such as the Nisei in World War II or the native Arabic speakers during the post-9/11 years to serve as translators and interpreters.²

These short-term fixes unfortunately did not solve the underlying need to build and sustain a broad, crisis-ready multilingual capability in the ranks of intelligence and national security personnel. Language training budgets increase only to be subject to fluctuation in outyears making it difficult to sustain programs. Hiring and training programs focus on certain “critical” languages only to be refocused when a different language need emerges, and keeping language instructors gainfully employed when their language is no longer in demand becomes its own challenge. Intelligence professionals are managed in a way that does not necessarily align with developing and using their language expertise.³

“In every national crisis from the Cold War through Vietnam, Desert Storm, Bosnia and Kosovo, our nation has lamented its foreign language shortfalls. But then the crisis ‘goes away,’ and we return to business as usual. One of the messages of September 11 is that business as usual is no longer an acceptable option.”

– Sen. Paul Simon, *Washington Post*, Op-Ed, October 2001

This is not to say that the IC has not made any progress. Some bright spots exist:

- In 1991, Congress established the National Security Education Program (NSEP), intended to increase the pool of language-qualified applicants for national security positions. Administered by the Department of Defense (DoD), the program provides scholarships and fellowships to American undergraduate and graduate students for the study of foreign languages critical to U.S. national interest. NSEP awardees are expected to fulfill a Federal service requirement upon program completion. As of 2022, nearly 4,800 recipients are working in Federally funded positions with nearly 80 percent of those placements in priority agencies, including DoD and the IC.⁴
- The National Media Exploitation Center and the National Virtual Translation Center were established in 2001 and 2003, respectively, each providing resources to national security agencies for the exploitation of foreign language materials.⁵
- In May 2012, the Director of National Intelligence formalized the establishment of a Foreign Language Executive Committee (FLEXCOM) to enable an integrated approach to develop, maintain, and improve IC foreign language capabilities. Each agency was required to designate a Senior Language Authority to oversee its respective foreign language matters and to serve on FLEXCOM.⁶
- Within K–12 education, programs supporting foreign language proficiency—such as Dual Language Immersion, Community Heritage, the Seal of Biliteracy—began to proliferate. STARTALK, a Federal grant program funded by the National Security Agency (NSA) and established in 2007, provides tuition-free programs in critical languages for K–16 students and professional development for teachers of critical need languages, benefiting more than 84,000 students and teachers.⁷ The number of foreign language enrollments in higher education spiked from 1,138,772 to 1,673,666 between 1995 and 2010, but unfortunately those numbers have fallen during the past decade (see Appendix B).⁸

... In the Face of Perennial Challenges

The challenges that make building and sustaining a language-ready workforce difficult in the first place are persistent. Learning another language is hard and it takes time—as much as two years for some languages in many U.S. Government programs. Training costs money and personnel time and, once acquired, language skills are perishable. Hiring for language is not always sufficient because finding and bringing onboard talent with both occupational-related qualifications and language proficiency can be difficult. Language requirements change, as any language can be important at any time.

Catalyst for Change: A Way Forward for the IC

So, what to do? The catalyst for real change that sticks is to better position ourselves to *act*—by committing to and executing an intentional, comprehensive strategy—and not to *react* to needs as they occur. For inspiration, I point to several key takeaways from my IC experience as CIA’s

Senior Language Authority. These are principles that I continue to draw upon even now outside of government in my participation in grassroots language advocacy at the national and state levels.

Reframing the Issue: Language Is not an Afterthought, but an Active Thought

As a first step, reframing the issue can serve as the driving force in moving from reactive to active. This means changing our thinking about the foreign language challenge as a single issue that can be solved to recognizing it requires an ongoing undertaking that reflects the dynamic nature of the organization and its mission. This shift moves our mindset from “We need more Chinese speakers today” to “We continually invest in having language skills at the ready.” In the case of IC agencies, it recognizes that the workforce is ever-changing—new people are hired, experienced people leave, and people move from assignment to assignment while employed. How much language capability, what percentage is being used, and what percentage has degraded at any given time within any given workforce naturally fluctuates. Likewise, while some languages are enduring in their utility to mission—Arabic, Chinese, Russian, and Spanish come to mind—specific language needs also fluctuate over time as missions change.

Reframing calls for the creation of a foreign language strategy that is in alignment, not conflict, with an organization’s overall strategy. It encompasses policies, practices, and programs that work in harmony with how an organization manages its talent. Language is not an afterthought, but rather an active thought. Such a strategy is woven into how the organization hires, assigns, manages, evaluates, and develops its talent. It includes answers to such questions as: How should language factor into assignments and promotions? What should be the optimal staff-contractor or civilian-military mix for language support? With what frequency should language skills be used? How should language skills be sustained when not in use? How, how frequently, and at what level of the organization should capability be measured and adjusted against well-defined but changing needs?

Reframing the issue is the underpinning to creating a comprehensive ongoing language strategy. The next four key takeaways support implementation of that strategy.

Leading the Way: Leaders Message and Act

What leaders—particularly the senior appointees who lead our intelligence organizations—say and do has meaning. Change happens and sticks when leaders say the right things and, importantly, back up what they say with actions aligned to the message. Director Panetta not only emphasized to the workforce the critical role that foreign language played in the intelligence mission frequently and at every opportunity, but he also ensured language programs were appropriately resourced to meet his vision. Leaders further have a role in ensuring the continued viability of an organization’s language strategy beyond their individual tenures. Leading the way might look like:

- Establishing language readiness as an organizational priority and calling upon organizational leaders to report regularly on their language readiness postures.
- Communicating expectations to organizational leaders that language skills within their units are to be maintained and used.

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- Messaging the importance of foreign language and the organization’s language goals regularly and at all levels.
 - Ensuring foreign language training budgets and programs are protected from year to year; sufficiently investing to meet current and enduring challenges even while planning for unanticipated language needs.
 - Empowering the Senior Language Authority to help shape and implement a comprehensive foreign language strategy.
 - Recognizing and celebrating mission successes attributed to foreign language capability.

Involve Everyone: Managers and Employees Each Play a Role

Responsibility for a multilingual workforce does not rest on the shoulders of leadership alone. Managers, supervisors, and employees all play a role to ensure language is woven into daily intelligence activities. Managers and supervisors are at the crucial intersection between an organization’s leadership and its workforce and thus aptly positioned to set expectations and provide opportunities. They should expect their workforce to acquire and maintain language skills and provide opportunities—such as time for immersion, study, or formal training—for employees to do so. For their part, employees should seek out the language skills they need to do their jobs more effectively. Once acquired, they should maintain those skills. Acquiring and maintaining language skills need to be approached with the same level of focus and drive as any mission assignment. Monetary incentives are used by many organizations and can indeed be useful motivators. We should not forget, though, that for some an even stronger motivator is the ability to get the mission done because one has the right skill set to do so. Involving everyone might look like:

FOR MANAGERS:

- Postponing deploying personnel until they have completed language training or achieved the necessary level of language proficiency for the assignment.
- Ensuring their workforce maintains their language capabilities by setting expectations and providing opportunities.
- Supporting their workforce in using their language skills to meet other temporary mission needs when the situation arises.
- Factoring language skills into permanent or temporary assignment selection decisions.
- Setting expectations for personnel working on a specific topic, but who might not have a language requirement, to acquire some level of language competency to better understand their target set.

FOR EMPLOYEES:

- Sustaining acquired language skills to be language-ready when the need arises.
- Contributing to temporary mission requirements involving language skills.
- Mentoring others and seeking mentorship to improve and sustain their language skills.
- Highlighting for their managers how they used their language skills and cultural knowledge on the job.

Ensure Visibility: Visibility Enables Optimization of Capability

Without visibility into the organization's foreign language capability and the means to track changes, it is difficult, if not impossible, for leaders and managers to effectively optimize the organization's talent. How will they know if requirements are being met and where the gaps are, how can they keep their senior leaders better informed or advocate for resources, and how can they avoid duplication of effort? Unfortunately, we sometimes face a situation in which "the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing." One part of the organization may be investing in promoting language study for its workforce, while another has insufficient funds to meet a similar need. One part of the organization may be desperately seeking capability in a less commonly taught language, while another has excess capacity. "Boutique" training efforts, where one office invests to improve its cadre of language-qualified personnel, within an organization may be fine, but awareness and insight need to reside at a central point to optimize limited human and financial resources effectively and equitably. Ensuring visibility might look like:

- Empowering the Senior Language Authority to have visibility into all aspects of the foreign language mission. (In my view this includes language-enabled, as well as language-required positions and people, contractor support, and use of technology.)
- Collecting, visualizing, and analyzing foreign language needs and capability data regularly.
- Creating mechanisms to quickly identify a capability when there is a sudden, emerging need, such as temporarily surging existing language talent from elsewhere within an organization, resource sharing within the IC, and expediting security clearances for new hires with a particular language skill.
- Ensuring managers have access to their foreign language-related data to make informed decisions about capability and gaps.

Harness Technology: Effectively Blend Human and Tech

The rapid advances of today's technology make new things possible. We are well beyond the days of "nonsensical machine-translated text" as the go-to image in our minds when we think of language technology. Well-established technologies, such as optical character recognition, computer-assisted translation, or textual analysis to process mega-quantities of foreign language material have transformed the work of translators. Language learning tools—such as language labs, use of immersive 360-degree images, multimedia platforms, and learning apps that adapt to an individual's pace of learning—have similarly reshaped the language learning classroom (in-person or online) for instructors and learners. Tools that provide automated visibility into an organization's language readiness have better enabled us to get a fuller picture and manage an organization's talent. We are only beginning to imagine what artificial intelligence can do for language processing and learning. It is imperative that the IC stay at the cutting edge of technology to create the most efficient and effective blend of human cognition and technological capability. Effectively harnessing technology might look like:

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- Ensuring translators and interpreters have the latest suite of technology to enhance their work.
 - Integrating use of language-processing tools, such as natural language processing, in language acquisition training itself—much like the introduction of calculators in mathematics instruction.⁹
 - Cultivating relationships with the private sector and academia to stay informed on the latest technologies.

Why a Foreign Language Strategy Matters

Each of these takeaways gives room for thought as to if and how they may be molded into our organizations to achieve a sustainable, multilingual, and multicultural IC. After all, the intelligence mission is about human relationships—whether we are monitoring behind the scenes to better understand an adversary’s plans and intentions, or actively engaging with allies to make the world a safer place. Language serves as a window into those relationships by providing insight into how others think and act and the cultures in which they reside. We should not be caught short as language needs arise.

Oh, and back to the mandate from then-DCIA Panetta: We did improve our foreign language capability posture by adhering to the principles described in this *Research Short*. That said, subsequent ebbs and flows in foreign language capability, especially as it relates to evolving mission needs, have only reinforced the importance of committing to a long-term foreign language strategy. Let’s act, then, and not wait for the next crisis to react.

Lorie Roule is an advocate for multilingual and multicultural competencies at the national level and in her home state of Virginia, as a member of the grassroots language advocacy organization Global Virginia. She also serves on the advisory boards of Planet Word Museum, Washington, DC, and Reencuentro Taino Conference—the latter dedicated to reviving the Taino (indigenous people of the Caribbean) language. During her 35-year career in the IC, Ms. Roule served as CIA’s Senior Language Authority (2010–13) and in other foreign language-related positions at both NSA and CIA.

If you have comments, questions, or a suggestion for a *Research Short* topic or article, please contact the NIU Office of Research at Research@niu.odni.gov.

Appendix A: Past Crises Spotlight the Foreign Language Deficit

Some notable languages that the U.S. Government has found itself struggling to acquire quickly at a critical time include:

- In World War II, the U.S. Government lacked Japanese language capability, resulting in the recruitment of hundreds of first- and second-generation Japanese Americans to translate Japan’s communications (even as others of Japanese descent were forced into internment camps for the duration of the war).¹⁰
- Russian was the overwhelming language need during the Cold War. Several former colleagues and I began our government careers in the 1980s as Russian Voice Language Analysts at NSA. Many later transitioned to other missions after the fall of the Soviet Union only to see a resurgence in the U.S. Government’s need for Russian language proficiency.
- The 1990s witnessed conflict in the Balkans and the ensuing need for the languages of the former Yugoslavia, including Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian. In testimony before the House Armed Services Committee in 2000, former Supreme Commander of NATO General Wesley Clark stated that “NATO’s actions in the Balkans had generated significant language requirements” but that the [U.S.] military not only lacked skills in these languages, but was “always going to be short of skilled linguists.”¹¹ The solution was to hire contract linguists, but even companies were finding it hard to find qualified language personnel who met the requirements.
- Similarly, the 9/11 Intelligence Commission report, published in December 2002, lamented that “The language problem has been one of the Intelligence Community’s perennial shortfalls. Prior to September 11, the shortage of language specialists who would be qualified to process large amounts of foreign language data in general, and Arabic in particular, was one of the most serious issues limiting the Intelligence Community’s ability to analyze, discern, and report on terrorist activities in a timely fashion.”¹² Yet, the 10-year period following the 9/11 attacks saw continued shortages in Middle Eastern and South Asian language skills among the various agencies. As an example of media reports criticizing the lack of Arabic, Pashto, and Dari language capability, the *Washington Post* noted, in October 2006, that five years after 9/11, only 33 FBI agents, none of whom worked on international terrorism, had even limited proficiency in Arabic;¹³ the CIA and other IC agencies faced the same challenge. Similarly, a 2011 Reuters article reported that U.S. “spy agencies” were still lacking in language skills “despite intense focus on Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Middle East in the last decade.”¹⁴
- Chinese, Persian, and Korean—long in the mix of language needs—have moved to the forefront, as the national security focus has turned toward China, Iran, and North Korea in more recent years. Likewise, the need for less commonly taught languages

periodically emerges, with the IC searching for the rare Burmese or Hausa speaker in its ranks when violence erupts in Myanmar or West and Central Africa.

The Modern Language Association has tracked data on languages studied in higher education and found that international and domestic developments influence which languages are studied by university students. Increased study of a particular “critical” language, however, has often come after the crisis at hand. A February 2017 study by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *America’s Languages: Investing in Language Education for the 21st Century*, makes this very point: “The United States has only focused on language education in times of great need, such as encouraging Russian studies during the Cold War or instruction in certain Middle Eastern languages after the terrorist attacks of 2001. At such moments, enrollments increase dramatically, but students require years of training before they can achieve a useful level of proficiency, often long after the immediate crisis has faded and national priorities have changed.”¹⁵

Appendix B: Building Foreign Language Capacity in U.S. Schools

The K–16 language pipeline is worth a special mention. Building capacity in the numbers of those studying and teaching foreign languages will have a direct, positive impact upon the ability of the IC to hire for language skills. This was the impetus behind STARTALK and the various NSEP programs, including the Boren Scholarships and Fellowships for undergraduate and graduate students, Language Flagship grants to U.S. institutions of higher education, and English for Heritage Language Speaker scholarships.

Unfortunately, language study in the United States is bleak. Only 20 percent of K–12 students study a foreign language¹⁶ and the trend for enrollments at the undergraduate and graduate levels for languages other than English is declining. Total enrollments dropped by 9.2 percent between fall 2013 and fall 2016, according to the Modern Language Association, and its sample survey of programs between 2016 and 2020 showed an even greater drop of 15.4 percent—albeit the pandemic may have had some impact.¹⁷ Programs are also on the decline. The total number of language programs offered in fall 2016 was down by 651, or 5.3 percent, since 2013, contrasted with a drop of only one language program between 2009 and 2013.¹⁸ And the downward trend for language students is exacerbated by the continued shortage of foreign language teachers. In the 2017–18 academic year, at least 49 of 56 U.S. states and territories experienced shortages in teachers qualified to teach world languages and bilingual education. These shortages are only projected to grow; by 2025, we could witness a hiring gap of 100,000 teachers annually.¹⁹

Increasing foreign language capacity in our country should be a concern for all of us not only for national security reasons, but also for our country’s economic prosperity. Language matters for many reasons: economic vitality and competitiveness, the success of our children as global citizens, the many cognitive benefits it provides, and for reasons of social justice. The good news is that we all have within our power the ability to advocate from where we are. Taking action can range from emphasizing the importance of foreign language skills and global citizenship with young people in our own personal networks, to partnering with educators and school boards to preserve and support foreign language programs, to enlisting private-sector participation in valuing and hiring for language to expand business opportunities, to making our voices heard with local, state, and national legislators, to refreshing our personal language skills or learning a new language for the first time. Even one small action can lead to lasting change.

Endnotes

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